

Has another 'rolling rally' spoiled area sports fans?

Fans of professional teams in New England could get used to this.

On June 19, the latest group of Boston professional athletes took to the duck boats for a "rolling rally" down the streets of Boston, with hundreds of thousands cheering the players on the caravan of 16 vehicles that meandered down the downtown streets.

It was less than eight months ago — Oct. 30, 2007 — when the Boston Red Sox held their second rally in four years in celebrating their latest World Series championship.

And one cannot forget the trio of Super Bowl victories by the New England Patriots, each of which was culminated with their own victory parade down the city streets.

If there was one laughable part, though, of the Celtics' rally last week, it was trying to figure why a team of 12 players needed 16 duck boats, especially when realizing that a New England Patriots team needed just 13 boats to carry the 53 players that made up their team in their last rally.

Upon watching each of the packed vehicles crawling down Tremont Street, it became apparent that many within the organization — or even many not employed by the Celts, had no shame in glomming onto the opportunity to wave ecstatically to fans as if they were the ones who had been on the floor of the TDBankNorth Garden blocking a Kobe Bryant shot on their way to an NBA title.

I think it's a safe bet that those lining the parade route, screaming

and yelling, weren't doing so for members of a sales team for a local sports radio station, but more so for NBA Finals MVP Paul Pierce, Kevin Garnett or any of the other 10 members of the championship squad.

ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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And adding one other annoying element, while the Red Sox had provided excellent visual aids in their two runs down the city streets with signs hanging from the duck boats identifying the players on them, the Celtics chose to skip that important step. Aside from the players that stuck out — Garnett, hoisting the championship trophy, and Pierce, holding up his Finals MVP trophy — fans were forced to have to do their share of guessing and squinting when catching the duck boats rolling down the road.

If there was any element that was disappointing to the "rolling rally," it was that it was simply too short. Even an hour or so before the rally began, many sections of the route weren't that full of fans, but shortly before the caravan of 16 rolled on by, the fans would fill that area to catch a quick glimpse.

And then it would be over for them.

By comparison, one of the more memorable rallies was the area's first, after the Patriots won their first Super Bowl against the St. Louis Rams in 2002, with former Pats corner Ty Law performing his trademark end zone dance, followed by the comedy of Law forcing head coach Bill Belichick and owner Bob Kraft to try to follow suit.

Then just a few years ago, there was Pats wide receiver Troy Brown blurting out his hilarious line from his United Way commercial repeatedly, "I got bingo!"

The common thread between the two, while both included a "rolling rally," was that each ended with the players and coaches up on a stage for all to see at Government Center.

No such luck if you were a Celtics fan this time around.

While being given the opportunity to cheer for your surprising team, there was little else offered, other than waves by players and coaches (and the bevy of those who have never stepped onto a basketball floor) ... and a shirtless Glen Davis.

Even the Sox' last rally, which was also devoid of any stage performance, at least had the rally screech to a halt a few times for fans to witness the zany Jonathan Papelbon do his "river dance" on a platform truck.

And while the Sox just had a rally last year, Sox fans wouldn't be too crazy about thinking about the prospects for another next year as well.

Even with the disappointing news that pitcher Curt Schilling won't be able to provide any starts

for the Sox this year, the team has been blessed with a number of solid starters that have provided the team depth, offering hope for another World Series trophy this year.

At the top of that list is young arm Justin Masterson, who came up from double-A Portland, and has shown a high level of gumption in not allowing himself to get frazzled in tough jams.

For the 23-year-old, in six of his seven starts thus far, he has at least pitched six innings, with his shortest stint a five-inning performance June 18 against Philadelphia.

Considering how quickly he has been able to acclimate himself to the major league game, highlighted by a nine-strikeout game against Cincinnati June 13, compared to how much starter Jon Lester had struggled in his first two years — until hitting his stride this year — one definitely has to be encouraged about Masterson's future.

Despite Lester's struggles in 2006 and 2007, with an ERA of 4.76, and then 4.57, things have improved so much for him this year that some now view him as possibly the second best pitcher on the Sox this year, with a 6-3 record and an ERA of 3.13.

That might be a bit of a stretch, though, considering the other starters on the roster, even if Lester became the second Sox starter to earn a no-hitter in two years, when he stymied the Kansas City Royals last month.

All one has to remember was the instant canonization of Clay Buchholz last season when he was hoisted by catcher Jason Varitek following his no-hitter against

Baltimore, and how many automatically pictured him as a lock for the starting rotation this year.

Buchholz, though, instead finds himself in Pawtucket (AAA), because of the crowded quarters on the big club, despite the loss of Schilling for the season, and Buchholz not with the big club. In a few short weeks, Sox management will find themselves having to make a tough call on who gets bumped when Bartolo Colon returns from a back injury.

And then there is Daisuke Matsuzaka. Despite a poor performance in his first start from the disabled list, Matsuzaka still holds a 8-1 record, and even after allowing seven runs in his last start (an ugly 63.00 ERA for the day), still holds a 3.46 ERA.

That leaves knuckleballer Tim Wakefield. While one might have thought that Wakefield would be the easy one to slide out of the rotation, based on his history of flexibility in being in the bullpen — his latest outing — an excellent one against Arizona where he shut out the Diamondbacks over seven innings on two hits (which followed five earlier solid outings), provides no easy solutions upon Colon's return.

Even though the starting rotation has been promising, there are some concerns with the offense, particularly with the recent injury to designated hitter David Ortiz.

While the Sox have tried to combat that loss by putting J.D. Drew in Ortiz's spot, despite some more promising numbers from last year's atrocious year where Drew hit a paltry 11 home runs, this year has provided still little evidence he is earn-

ing the dollars from his gaudy five year-\$70 million deal he signed entering last season.

Among the more glaring numbers was a 29-game homerless streak, from April 12 to May 20. Even though he has already exceeded his home run numbers from last year, and is well on pace to pass his sad 64 RBI total from last year, other numbers only raise red flags. Of his 30 extra base hits (14 HRs, 14 doubles and two triples), none have resulted in his coming through with clutch RBIs to have the Sox squeak away with a win. Only once has Drew had an extra base hit in the ninth, in a 9-8 loss, and the other six times where he had an extra base hit in either the seventh or eighth innings, the Sox either lost the game, or won by at least five runs.

If anything positive can be derived from Drew's performance this year, it is that when he has had an extra base hit or two in a game, the Sox have won their fair share, having won 12 of their last 16 in those instances, compared to just two of the first nine games this season when that happened.

In addition, while Drew was struggling with showing any power earlier this season, having just four home runs through the end of May — a span of 45 games — he has shown by far his most power in a Sox uniform in the past few weeks (22 games), with 10 home runs this month.

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